

Kasbah des Oudayas, Rabat

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Kadagan

Rabat ramps up

A new British Airways flight to Morocco's capital is putting this underrated city back in the spotlight, writes **Yolanda Zappaterra**

It's a dreary early morning and half of us are dozing when the cabin manager makes her first inflight announcement. "Ladies and gentlemen, we'd like to welcome you on board this inaugural British Airways flight from London Gatwick to Rabat," she says. "We'll soon be passing through the cabin with champagne and chocolate for everyone."

A palpable air of excitement ripples through the cabin, which only builds as our three-hour flight to Morocco's capital city continues. There's talk of news crews, British Embassy staff, Moroccan dignitaries and even minor royalty waiting for us at Rabat-Salé Airport.

FRESH FACES

The new BA route is clearly a big deal, and it's a strong indicator of how tourism in Morocco is going from strength to strength – from January to October this year, tourist arrivals rose by almost 14% year on year to 16.6 million. The flight has the potential to bring a significant number of British tourists to

Rabat, a coastal capital with enough activities and attractions to deliver a great winter-sun city break.

Ours begins with a visit to Rabat's 12th-century Kasbah des Oudayas, an oceanfront citadel entered via a broad sandstone staircase (pictured, opposite), which Tom Cruise drove down in the 2015 film *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*. After admiring the impressive ramparts, intricate gateways and Andalusian gardens of the fortress, we descend into tiny white alleyways punctuated by bright bursts of bougainvillea and hand-painted doors.

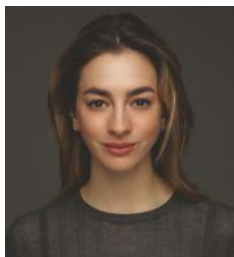
The aroma of bread being baked in communal ovens is everywhere. So too are kittens playing on the cobbled streets and hole-in-the-wall shops selling tempting pastries, along with less inviting bowls of *babbouche* – snails in broth.

Next, we head to the Hassan Tower, an elegant, 12th-century structure that dominates the city's skyline. The old minaret is part of an unfinished mosque, as is the expansive pillar-filled courtyard fronting it; the building blocks of what was intended to be one ➤

DESTINATIONS

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AGENTS' views



Ellie Papadopoulou,
travel advisor and founder,
Wander Travel by Ellie

"Rabat has a sense of calm you don't usually associate with Morocco, which gives the city a more polished, quietly confident atmosphere. I braced myself for the energy of Marrakech or Casablanca, but instead I found a capital that has clearly benefited from thoughtful redevelopment. For leisure travellers, I'd recommend Rabat as a one to three-night stop on a wider Morocco trip. As a standalone, it works best for travellers with specific interests."



Alex Locke, general manager,
1000 Mile Travel

"I love Rabat's mix of old and new – open boulevards intertwined with ancient landmarks. It feels safe, warm and welcoming; it's nice not to feel pressured or hassled in the markets. Chellah was like a peaceful, hidden oasis, with some of the city's deepest history set amid beautiful gardens. It was a delight to explore and absorb the energy of such a special, ancient site. Agents could combine two hotels in different areas to give clients access to both its cultural and coastal activities."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Salé beach; Hassan Tower, Rabat; the city's Garden of Botanical Trials

PICTURES: Shutterstock/David Ionut, Kasbah; Yolanda Zappaterra



of the largest mosques in the world. But once the ruling caliph Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Mansur died, so too did his magnificent building project.

The Hassan Tower is connected to the 1960s Mausoleum of Mohammed V, where the golden mosaic cupola reminds me of Istanbul's Hagia Sofia. Later in the day, we are equally blown away by the ancient site of Chellah (some 15 minutes outside Rabat), with its 14th-century necropolis overlaying a first-century BC Roman settlement. As I wander manicured gardens filled with bamboo groves, fruit trees and nesting storks, I explore the many layers of Chellah's history.

FOOD AND FOOTBALL

Subsequent days reveal more arresting sites and activities, among them the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern & Contemporary Art and a 42-acre botanical garden in the heart of Rabat. We also take a sunset boat trip past the Zaha Hadid-designed Grand Theatre.

From our waterfront base at the Fairmont La Marina Rabat-Salé Hotel, we take morning beach walks to watch surfers enjoying breaking Atlantic waves, teenagers swimming in gentler waters and kids playing football on the vast beach. Fun fact: Salé, just over the Bou Regreg River from Rabat, is sometimes overlooked as a commuter town, but it has one of Morocco's oldest football clubs.

Evenings are spent exploring Rabat's laid-back medina, where the old city's main street, Rue des Consuls, is filled with colourful carts piled high vegetables, meat, seafood and river fish that are transformed into amazing dishes at the city's restaurants. ➤

GETTING THERE

BA Euroflyer flies from Gatwick to Rabat twice-weekly year-round – in winter on Wednesdays and Sundays – from £62 one-way. ba.com

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WHERE TO STAY



Fairmont La Marina Rabat-Salé

A sought-after beachfront setting and bright rooms make this a top choice for Salé, with a colourful wooden ferry offering easy and inexpensive access to the Rabat medina. Rooms from £218.

[accor.com](https://www.accor.com)



The Ritz-Carlton Rabat

Opened in 2024, this regal 440-acre resort will hit the spot with golfers thanks to its location next to the Royal Golf Dar Es Salam course. Rooms from £362.

[marriott.com](https://www.marriott.com)



Conrad Rabat Arzana

A nearby water park and action-packed kids' club give this modern seafloor resort in Temara, a 30-minute drive from central Rabat, strong family appeal. Rooms from £204.

[hilton.com](https://www.hilton.com)



Rabat Marriott Hotel

Connected to the Arribat shopping centre, this spa property blends Moorish and

modern designs and suits those looking for a lively city vibe. Rooms from £186.

[marriott.com](https://www.marriott.com)



Four Seasons Hotel Rabat at Kasr Al Bahr

Rich Moroccan decoration and extensive gardens give this sea-facing

200-room hotel a distinctly Arabian feel. Rooms from £435.

[fourseasons.com](https://www.fourseasons.com)



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Coastal ramparts, Rabat; fam trip group at Fairmont La Marina Rabat-Salé; Al Marsa restaurant; doorway in the city's medina PICTURES: Yolanda Zappaterra

At Le Dhow, a boat moored on the Bou Regreg, we pile into seafood *pastilla* pies, fish tagines and a selection of salads as colourful as they are delicious. In the medina, we're led by lantern light to Dinarjat, where we tuck into mountains of couscous and koftas. And at Spanish waterside restaurant Al Marsa, in the swish marina, we demolish piles of seafood and paella.

The array of restaurants is just what you'd expect from a city that so successfully marries its ancient roots with a global, modern vibe. That's true of transport too: a new high-speed rail link from Rabat to Marrakech is under construction, and one evening we travel to Rabat's old medina using the quick and reliable tram. We decide to leave the alternative – a picturesque rowing-boat

ferry across the river from Salé – for another visit.

With its eye firmly on its role as a venue for the 2030 Fifa World Cup – which Morocco is co-hosting – this football-mad city is determined to put itself on the tourist map. And looking at the emerging new airport terminal, it has all the right ingredients. **TW**

BOOK IT

Explore's nine-day Upgraded – Discover Morocco tour, including a night in Rabat, costs from £1,556 per person, based on a March 14 departure. Includes breakfast, some meals, tour leader, all ground transport, listed activities and eight nights' accommodation, but excludes flights. [explore.co.uk](https://www.explore.co.uk)